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ABSTRACT

There is a vast body of literature devoted to an examination of life-span development. Several authors have described the characteristics of the life-span approach and have distinguished it from more traditional forms of psychology. Emphasis has been placed on the multidirectional and multidimensional nature of development and change, as well as on the multicausality of behaviors. The life-span approach has been characterized as focusing on basic issues in life-span developmental psychology, such as methodology and research design, cross-cultural and longitudinal studies, age-stage phenomena, and stability and change. In addition, this approach uses age divisions from infancy through late adulthood and emphasizes the developmental areas of physiology, cognition, language, perception, sex roles, and personality. The life-span approach brings a multidisciplinary perspective in its focus on different life stages with emphasis on change and continuity. This approach encapsulates a psychology of aging. When used in teaching a psychology of aging course, the life-span approach permits students to examine the complexities of development, to learn that there are no simple answers to complex questions, and to take responsibility for creating their futures. Such a perspective, while often difficult to communicate in teaching, is appropriate for the intellectually curious and for those able to live with ambiguity and uncertainty. (NB)

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Teaching the psychology of aging: A life-span perspective[1]

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The title of this session is sufficiently broad that one can focus on almost any of its aspects--"teaching", "the psychology of aging", "life-span perspective" or, in typical fashion, the interactions of these three semi-independent variables. My focus, however, will be on the use of a life-span perspective in the teaching of the psychology of aging with particular emphasis on the what and why of this approach. In order that you understand my biases and can take them into account in your evaluation of my comments, let me explain my particular interest in this topic. Aside from Tom's telephone call, it arose indirectly from discussions with colleagues at Miami University (in Ohio) when we attempted to differentiate social gerontology from "the" (or "a") sociology of aging and both from life-span sociology. Those discussions led me to a parallel interest in differentiating between "the" (or "a") psychology of aging and a life-span developmental perspective. Perhaps my meta interest is in distinguishing the boundaries and overlaps of academic disciplines.

I plan today to discuss some differentiating characteristics of a life-span perspective, why I personally think that perspective is a preferred one for teaching a psychology of aging course, and the strengths and weaknesses of a life-span perspective.

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In giving my current thinking it may be important that you understand my fairly ecclectic, pragmatic and multidisciplinary perspective because this provides a framework within which you can evaluate my thoughts. I am, by academic degrees, an undergraduate sociology major, a master (mistress) of arts in social service administration with an emphasis on psychiatric social work and a Ph.D. in experimental social psychology. I hold rank in a Department of Sociology and Anthropology, have taught in a Department of Psychology and engage in periodic forays into administration. I am off-time in most of my professional and personal activities. I am, by conviction a semi-empirical pragmatist who urges an historical perspective and who has a perpetual identity crisis.

DIFFERENTIATING CHARACTERISTICS:

There is a vast body of literature devoted to an examination of life-span development. Writers and speakers have focused on its characteristics and salient issues. The West Virginia University conferences on life-span developmental psychology are well known as a major source of such information. The contributors to the published proceedings of those conferences constitute a who's who in the field. In the first publication in that series, Goulet and Baltes commented in the preface that the field of life-span developmental psychology was undergoing a "quiet revolution" (190, pxiii). Because of problems faced and questions raised, there was a need for "...innovative, and perhaps completely new ways of studying time-related behavior change in its continuity and potential discontinuity throughout the

entire life span (p. xiv). While the roots of this approach extend both deeper and longer than the publication of that book, the growth and development (if you'll excuse the terminology) in the United States is relatively recent.

Since that time a number of other authors have described the characteristics of this approach, distinguishing it from more traditional forms of psychology. Kausler, for example, discusses the relationships between the experimental psychology of aging and gerontology and between developmental psychology and life-span developmental psychology. He suggests that the psychology of aging can be subsummed in both life-span developmental psychology and gerontology (p. 15). Incidentally, by this action he has granted to gerontology the status of an academic discipline that others may not agree to. He points out that "...the existence of a psychology of aging--and, therefore, an experimental psychology of aging--is perfectly consistent with the traditional age-segmented approach to developmental psychology" (p. 17). The issues and methods are essentially the same. At the same time, he views a life-span approach as an alternative to the more traditional (my word) age-range or age-segmented developmental psychology (or what I refer to as Rip Van Winkle approach) (p. 17). The life-span perspective views development as "...a multidimensional process that is strongly influenced by cultural-social changes as well as by biological changes in the organism per se" (17).

Baltes, Reese and Nesselroade characterize a life-span approach to humans as one that focuses on: (1) basic issues related to the study of life-span developmental psychology, such as methodology and research design,

cross-cultural and longitudinal studies, age-stage phenomena, and stability and change; (2) age divisions--infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, young and middle adulthood, and late adulthood; and, (3) on developmental areas such as physiology, cognition, language, perception, sex roles, and personality (1977:pv). Baltes, Reese and Lipsitt, in their 1980 chapter in the Annual Review of Psychology, reemphasize that a life-span developmental psychology is "...concerned with the description, explanation, and modification (optimization) of developmental processes in the human life course from conception to death" (1980:66). They see this approach as an orientation to study rather than a theory. Without going into a great deal, I should like to call specific attention to the emphasis placed on multidirectional and multidimensional nature of development and change, as well as the multicausality of behaviors. And, finally, as illustrative of a current textbook discussion, let me draw on Troll's text. As she points out, our life expectancies are increasing and with it our vision of life. We think beyond "being grown up" to what we will continue to be doing in later life (1983:1). With this extended future, it is inevitable that scientists follow life seeking to learn more about what we will be doing, why, how, and with what consequences.

Such are the issues life-span developmental psychologists deal with, beyond the lab into the world. In this world they are faced with sloppy questions about what is going on--sloppy in the sense that the questions and answers are rarely parsimonious and elegant, more often qualitative than quantitative and frequently leading to further questions.

Because a life-span perspective is a multidisciplinary one, it is useful to see how it is handled by other academic disciplines.

For example, Dannefer, a sociologist, urges a theoretical reformulation of the study of adult development. He emphasizes the need for greater attention to social environments and what he refers to as "...the profoundly interactive nature of self: society relations" (1984:100). He further stresses the need to examine the rarely specified implicit assumptions in developmental models noting that non-normative influences are not necessarily deviant. Nydegger, an anthropologist, in a recent presentation at the International Association of Gerontology, raised some fascinating questions about age norms and personal timetables. The latter may not be normative but neither are they deviant.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES TO TEACHING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF AGING THROUGH A LIFE-SPAN DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY APPROACH.

A life-span approach brings a multidisciplinary perspective in its focus on different life stages (if indeed there are stages--not the Rip Van Winkle clumps I referred to earlier, artificially imposed by sleeping psychologists). The emphasis is on change and continuity. This emphasis moves away from more traditional psychological and sociological conception of human lives--it is neither Dennis Wrong's oversocialized conception of man (19) nor its equivlent over psychologicalized conception of women, rather it is somewhere between in a dynamic force field. It describes life as it is lived, attempting to explain its complexities of human behaviors. It moves away from life in chunks of years characterized by tasks and

traits, bounded by abstract norms and quantitative data. A life-span approach is concerned with the multiple sources of changes in constantly changing environments. It deals, grammatically, with the plural rather than the singular. It calls attention to the possibility that aging and old age may require new paradigms, new methods, new terminology, that growing old is not necessarily adding to youth. It reminds us that one is born into an historical time, faced with demographic realities, coping with a cultural environment, dealing with social situations, living in a physical body, experiencing through that body, interpreting the world(s) in which one lives as the symbol bearing and symbol using animal one is.

If my description of the life-span developmental approach is even somewhat accurate, it encapsulates a psychology of aging, broadening the descriptive, explanatory and intervention bases. It provides students with opportunities to examine the complexities of development and teaches simultaneously that there are no simple answers to complex questions--an important thing to learn in a democratic society (no value free talk this). It permits students to learn that living happily ever after may occur in fairy tales but that current stories require the hero and heroine to take a part in creating their futures not passively accepting them, that they have responsibilities for the "living after".

Obviously, such a perspective is often more difficult to communicate in teaching. In part these difficulties are the flip side of the foregoing points, in part the problems faced by anyone engaged in multi or interdisciplinary endeavors. Teachers may have insufficient familiarity with and/or expertise in a disciplinary approach such as in a psychology of aging

course. It is more difficult because there are no simple and comfortable answers to our research questions. It is particularly unsatisfying as an approach to those students whose sole intellectual question is "Will it be on the exam?"

It is also difficult because it seems less "pure" than more traditional orientations. The research strategies are difficult, the answers less parsimonious. Yet the old answers and constructs may not be appropriate for our analysis of old age. How much, for example, do we know about the many informal processes of socialization in late life? How are norms modified and ignored in interactions with people? How do we exempt ourselves from norms, expectations, stereotypes? How do we learn (if we do learn) to be old? How do our earlier life decisions and actions affect our late life behaviors and how does our memory of these choices remain with us in the present, reconstituted, recreated, reorganized? How do our scientific findings about aging and old people become transformed into our mechanisms of socialization?

A life-span perspective is, however, hospitable for the intellectually curious and those able to live with ambiguity and uncertainty, all characteristics of the human condition.

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